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AUTHOR Gegerias, Mary
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of French business cards in a college-level French language and culture course for professionals. Among other assignments, students were each given a different card and asked to speak about the design of their card, the business represented, idiomatic expressions and historical allusions on the card, and the use of business cards in France. Students also discussed the relevance of the often ornate and literary cards, as well as the influence of American words and expressions on French business communication. Examples of seven cards are reproduced. (MDM)

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Mary Gegerias

March 1, 1993

ED 370 386

Jeu de cartes or Jeu Descartes: Business Cards in a French Course for the Professions

It was during a recent sabbatic leave in France, granted in order that I may research and study Michel Butor's use of cartes postales for special collages and correspondance that I became fascinated with another kind of card, the equivalent of the American business card, the ubiquitous, French carte de visite. Though the purpose of this card differs from that of the traditional calling card, the French continue to refer to it as "carte de visite." Perhaps, the term and definition that appeared in the 1882 edition of the Littré dictionary would be more precise and less suggestive of social etiquette: "Carte d'adresse--les cartes que fait distribuer un marchand pour faire connaître sa maison" (496). But paradoxically, current usage still highlights the antiquated term even in the presence of more modern language like "le minitel" and "le fac-simile" that identify the newer technological means of communication.

Terminology nothwithstanding, these venerable cartes de visite are readily available in almost all Paris shops, and are always offered generously by eager salespeople. Thus, during my leave in Paris, having already been conditioned by my detective-like investigation of Butor's cards, I found myself entering Paris shops, without any serious intention of purchasing their extravagant wares, but because a Picasso design in a display window or a Cartesian trade name caught my fancy, and visions of miniature masterpieces in the form of cartes de visite stirred my curiosity.

As a teacher of French language, literature, and culture, I was quick to recognize the utility of these extraordinarily varied cards. I, consequently, took them more seriously, and my casual interest became more obsessive. My collection expanded, and cards multiplied in number, shape, size, color, superfine print. Imaginative shop names fed my poetic fancy and filled my teacher's handbook: AUX FILS DU TEMPS, la grange à buci, La Rose des Vents, DEMONS ET MERVEILLES, MIMI LA SARDINE, Marché Noir, Zadig et Voltaire, LE

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RIDEAU DE PARIS, petit faune, JEUX DESCARTES, le festin de Babette, BOUCHERIE DE LOUVOIS, MIKIHOUSE, Aux laines Ecossaises, Top CUISINES, FRANCOIS VILLON, Golden Dove, Tapisseries robert four, LES FEUX DE LA RAMPE, La Maison de Poupée, Tabatière Odéon, ESPACE, spOrt et climat, READY MADE--Lumière pour roman noir, Boutique GO, LIBRAIRIE BONAPARTE, Chocolats DEBAUVE & GALLAIS, le petit jour, RELUIRE 55, l'oiseau de paradis, LA BOUTIQUE A BOUTONS, A LA BONNE RENOMMEE, Marie Mercié, LA SweaTeriE, Librairie Maison Rustique, Au troubadour, ULTRAMOD, LEGRAND TAILLEUR, Librairie des Facultés de Médecine et de Pharmacie, LIBRAIRIE DU CYGNE, LA PEAU DE PORC . . . to mention only a few.

Collecting the cards was, obviously, not a prime-time activity. Collating them in preparation for a newly-combined language and culture course, FRENCH FOR THE PROFESSIONS, was a trickier exercise. High on the list of categories were "ingenuity of trade name," originality and impact of design," richness of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions,""grammatical complexity," "pervasiveness and implications of '_franglais_'."

The _carte de visite_ also represented significant areas of study as a historical, literary, or geographic reference, as an efficacious marketing tool, and even more dramatically, to use a term coined by Situationist artists to describe "purposeless and yet attentive meander through urban landscape especially certain favorite districts of Paris" (_Passage_ 3), as a "_dérive_" guide to Paris businesses, and to the city of Paris, itself. It was soon necessary, however, to establish perimeters of study within the time frame of a specific course and a single semester. The history of business cards, alone, could have easily taken one back not only to the early nineteenth century when it is presumed that the _carte de visite_ came into general use, but also to early, hieroglyphic, Egyptian inscriptions, Roman panels in relief, medieval coats-of-arms, eighteenth-century London shop-signs and Traders' cards, all of which, in their own way and time, were intended to draw attention to the location of a trade (Heal 4-26).

After much trepidation about the best approach to this _jeu de_

cartes, I distributed a different card to each student, with copies available to all, and I asked each card-holder to research and speak about the cards within specific categories, at regular intervals, between other required course assignments. A preliminary quiz, highlighting vocabulary, idiomatic expression, grammatical constructions, and also business or professional references appearing on the cards, had also been administered before the material was distributed in order to guarantee some concrete measure of progress and success when a similar verification occurred at the end of the term.

In the initial discussions about trade names and originality of design, there was much mirth and laughter, but the students became more thoughtful, and they were quick to compare the "hands" that they were dealt, as they found themselves caught up in the tricks of the jeu. They especially liked two cards featuring reproductions in color--one in blue and rose pastel of an ancient fabric with a medieval design (AUX FILS DU TEMPS), and the other, also in pastel, but in more varied shades, of an oil painting, entitled, "Les Fleurs," by Jacky Bourreau-Xana, from the flower shop, La grange à buci.

Likewise, there were many cheers for the architects' slick, glossy card with geometric forms (ESPACE), and the black and white design from La Maison de Poupée of an antique doll, graciously attired in nineteenth-century dress: high-collared white shirt, black vest, pleated skirt, feathered hat. The doll is depicted standing in a flower garden, admiring a bird perched on the tip of her right forefinger, while firmly holding a butterfly net in her left hand.

Of course, finding precise words in French to describe the scenes and figures was not always easy: How does one say "medieval fabrics" in French? "pastel shades?" "oil paintings?" "glossy?" "butterfly net?" The dictionary was in great demand. But in most cases, printed under the trade names, there are explanatory expressions like "étoffes anciennes," "huile sur toile," "poupées de collection," that served as a base from which students could begin their vocabulary quest and on which they could build their descriptions and oral exposés.

In subsequent classes, where the pervasiveness of franglais was also a topic of discussion, emphasis was on grammatical constructions and idiomatic expression. In the simplest analysis, "LA SweaTeriE," "Le Rideau de Paris," "Librairie Bonaparte," "DEMONS ET MERVEILLES" illustrated the possible use and omission of articles where specificity or title-like name prominence is intended. "LA BOUTIQUE A BOUTONS," "LA PEAU DE PORC," "l'oiseau de paradis," demonstrated the grammatical use of prepositions with complements to specify "purpose," "kind," and "place of origin." And to illustrate the versatility of the preposition "à" in elliptical expressions indicating the place where specific articles are sold, or where a desired quality is guaranteed, the two trade names, "Aux Laines Ecossaises," and "A LA BONNE RENOMMEE" that features "'un sac' très bonne renommée" served as meaningful examples.

Enthusiasm generated by these initial exercises was generally sustained throughout the semester as students progressed from simple card games to more complex jeux de cartes, on double and triple levels, where facetious puns, in their equivocal meanings, combined references to language, both French and English, literature, history, and social attitudes and activity. Random chuckles always identified students who were quick to recognize wit and humor in the select cards of "JEUX DESCARTES" (a shop located across from the Sorbonne and specializing in high-powered mathematical and electronic games); "Marché noir" (a "legitimate" women's millinery shop selling black accessories only); "Golden Dove" (a jewelry store located on la rue du Vieux Colombier, across from the former site of the venerated theater, le Vieux Colombier, a symbolic dovecote for celebrated actors in its heyday);"LA BOUCHERIE DE LOUVOIS" (a butcher shop bearing the name of Louis XIV's Minister of War); and, of course, "MIKIHOUSE" that resonates the sounds and name of Mickey Mouse, and of all that it symbolizes--specifically, in this case, bright-colored children's apparel.

In describing the guidelines for this jeu de cartes, I did acknowledge, earlier, the need to establish certain perimeters

within the limits of the course for reasons of organization, and also to achieve some depth in the study of French for the professions. I must admit, however, that such boundaries proved to be only theoretical and difficult to maintain. Just as I had shuffled the cards many times in order to view them from different linguistic, cultural, and even temporal perspectives, since my sabbatic leave had taken place in 1989, and I taught FRENCH FOR THE PROFESSIONS in 1992, spontaneous discussions about the cards crossed professional, class, cultural, and even ethnic boundaries.

A major question of discussion pertained to the relevance of such a sophisticated marketing device as the carte de visite, and more broadly, to the justification of the principle of marketing, itself, during times of economic stress. French economist, Guy Serraf's response to the broader question, in a student text based on his article, "Société en crise: crise de conscience du marketing," was conveniently interpreted by students as appropriately Gallic for defending the French carte de visite: "Se priver de la fonction stratégie serait purement et simplement du suicide . . . C'est justement dans la tempête qu'on a besoin d'une bonne science de pilotage"(54). (To deprive oneself or to eliminate the practice of strategy would be downright suicidal . . . It is precisely during a storm, a period of crisis, that one needs to know how to pilot the ship, to market one's products).

Related questions were raised about the ability of the average Frenchman to appreciate the historical references in such trade names as LA BOUCHERIE DE LOUVOIS. For whom are such references intended, what do they achieve, and what do they reflect about the French people? How will this trade name now fare in a city that has a large immigrant population less well versed in the history of its adopted country?

Also, will the newly-launched Euro-Disney World have a fortuitous impact on marketing for MIKIHOUSE? If "yes," how? If "no," why not? There was much speculation about the future of MIKIHOUSE, and many unanswered questions--primarily, in the French language--thus making it possible for the class to achieve,

multidimensionally, what Claire Kramsch, in her article on the use of authentic media material in the language classroom, called, "International Discourse" (341).

Discourse there was, about France and the world, in the course, FRENCH FOR THE PROFESSIONS. And as we dramatized grammar review and vocabulary expansion, we also had lots of fun.

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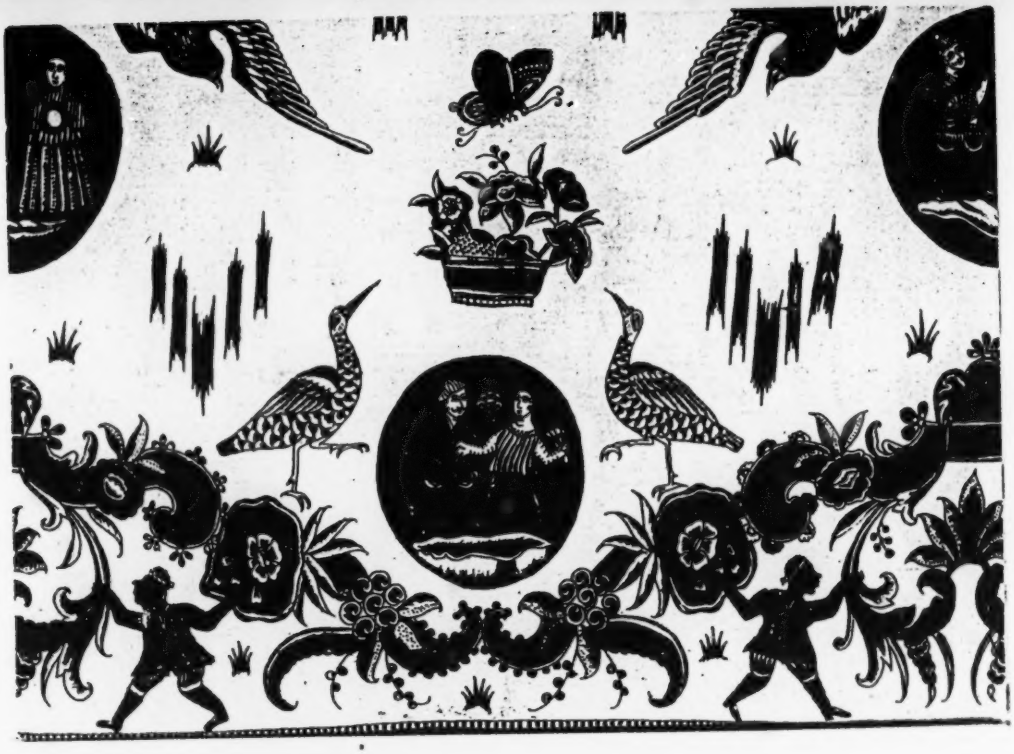

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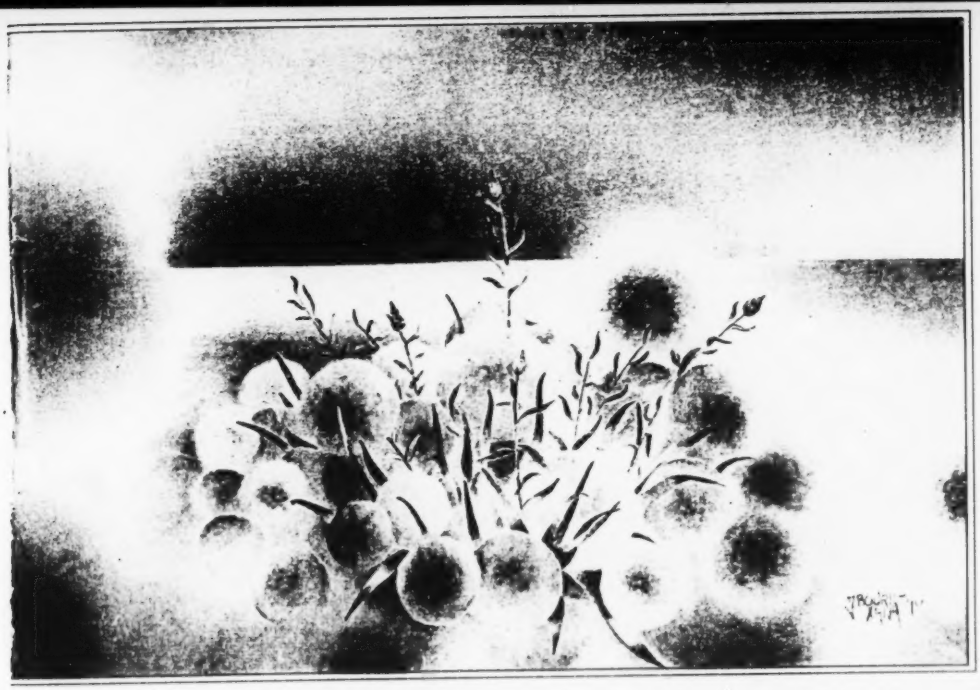

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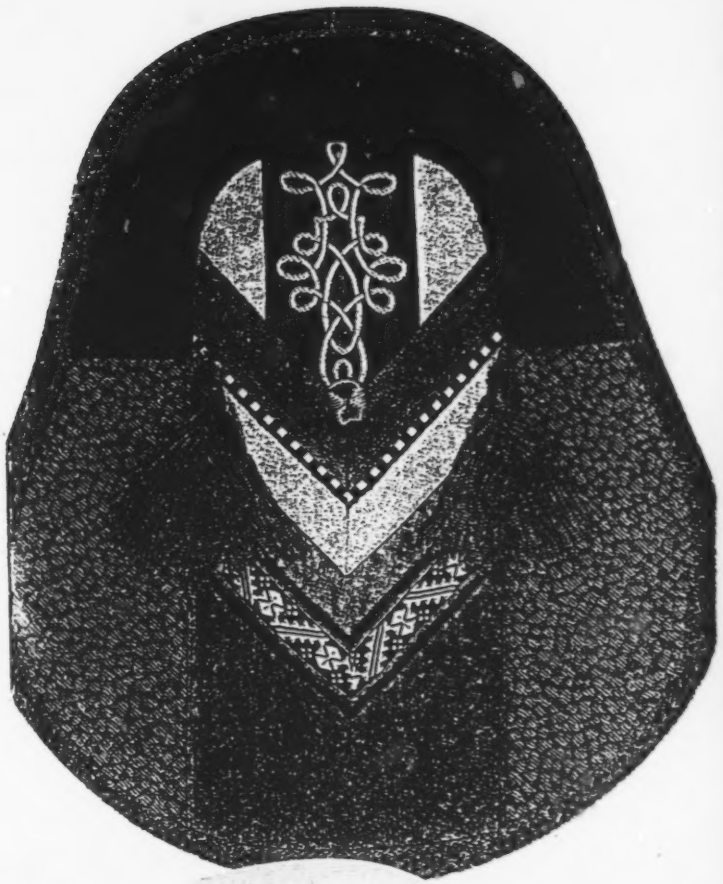

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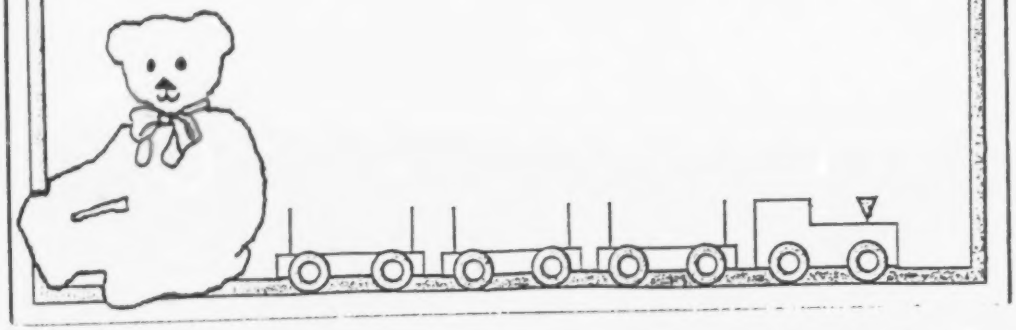

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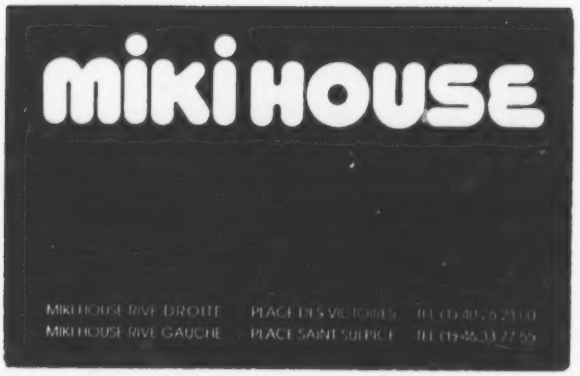
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